Hominids, hairy hominoids and the science of humanity

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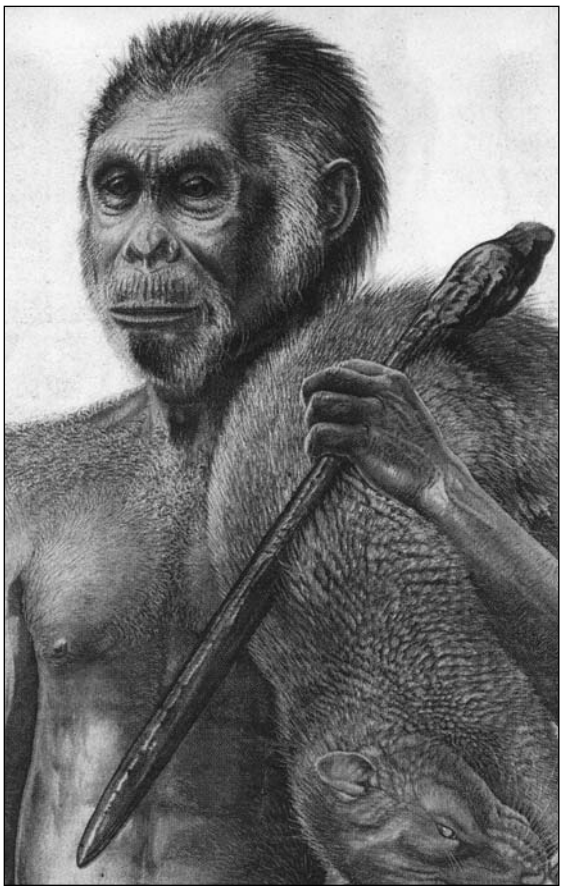
Anthropology – or at least one kind of anthropology – has been in the headlines for the last several months. In late October, palaeoanthropologists and archaeologists working on the eastern Indonesian island of Flores announced the remarkable discovery of a new species of the genus *Homo*, a new kind of human dubbed *Homo floresiensis*. Found at Liang Bua, a site in the western Flores district of Manggarai, the type specimen is a 30-year-old female who died some 18,000 years ago, while remains of other individuals are as recent as 13,000 years ago.[1] As both dates are well within the period in which *Homo sapiens* has been established in the Indonesian islands, it is extremely likely that 'Flores man' lived in close proximity to (and in all probability interacted with) modern humans. This fact alone is quite amazing, for it indicates that, within geologically very recent times, two distinct species of humans were contemporary in at least one part of the world – thus furthering the view that human evolution is by no means unilinear, and that having two or more species of the genus alive at the same time may be the norm.[2]

So we are not alone – or were not so alone – as we once thought. But the find has more specific implications, and also a history. Building on earlier discoveries by Theodor Verhoeven, a Dutch missionary-archaeologist who unearthed fossil stegodons (an ancestral elephant) and associated lithic artefacts in central Flores in the 1960s, an international research team made up largely of Indonesians and Australians was excavating at Liang Bua in the hope of uncovering remains of the tool-makers and elephant hunters. According to one interpretation, fossil and lithic evidence for stegodon hunting may date to as early as 840,000 years ago; if correct, the hunters would have been not *Homo sapiens* but *Homo erectus*. But as Flores has been an island for as long as anyone can determine, this left palaeontologists with a major question – namely, how such an archaic hominid had ever got there. That problem remains to be solved. And before the recent discovery, direct evidence for pre-*sapiens* hominids of any sort was also lacking.

What the excavators actually found at Liang Bua was truly astonishing, for instead of a classic *erectus*, they recovered remains of a hominid[3] that stood just over a metre tall and had a brain capacity of only 380cc, the size of a chimpanzee's. Not only is this small in absolute terms, it is small even in relation to the diminutive body size (Mirazon Lahr and Foley 2004). On this basis, *Homo floresiensis* has been interpreted as a new species altogether, evolved from *Homo erectus* by way of endemic dwarfing resulting from isolation on an island. Although dwarfing is a process well known in other animals, it is unusual for members of the genus *Homo*, whose normal mode of adaptation has always been thought to be primarily cultural and technological. And yet another surprise: an interpretation of the archaeological context suggests that the tiny hominids may have fashioned sophisticated stone tools and hunted pygmy stegodons (similarly dwarfed animals that became extinct on Flores some 12,000 years ago, possibly around the same time as *Homo floresiensis* also ceased to be). It has even been speculated that they had language. Although the linguistic and technological attributions have been questioned on the grounds of the creature's small brain, a recent endocast analysis of the cranium has indicated a hominid with highly convoluted frontal lobes, suggesting cognitive capabilities superior to those of *Homo erectus* and more comparable to *Homo sapiens* (Falk et al. 2005, Balter 2005).



PETER SCHOUTEN / REUTERS / NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Fig. 1. The reconstruction of Homo floresiensis *that has appeared in several publications (the individual appears to be carrying a specimen of the Flores giant rat,* Papagomys armandvillei*).*

Some implications for social and cultural anthropology

The unexpected character of *Homo floresiensis* was summed up rather dramatically by one of the palaeontological investigators, Peter Brown, when he claimed he would have been less surprised by the discovery of a space alien (Gee 2004). As several commentators have pointed out, the diminutive denizens of Liang Bua raise new questions concerning the definition of humanity and the supposed singularity of our own species, *Homo sapiens*. Their discovery also has radical implications for our understanding of human evolutionary biology and the kind of physical equipment required for the development of culture and language – especially given the tiny yet disproportionately complex brain. Particularly now that a counter-view of the type specimen as a microcephalic pygmy *Homo sapiens* has largely been discredited, it seems that, one way or another, the proverbial book will have to be rewritten.

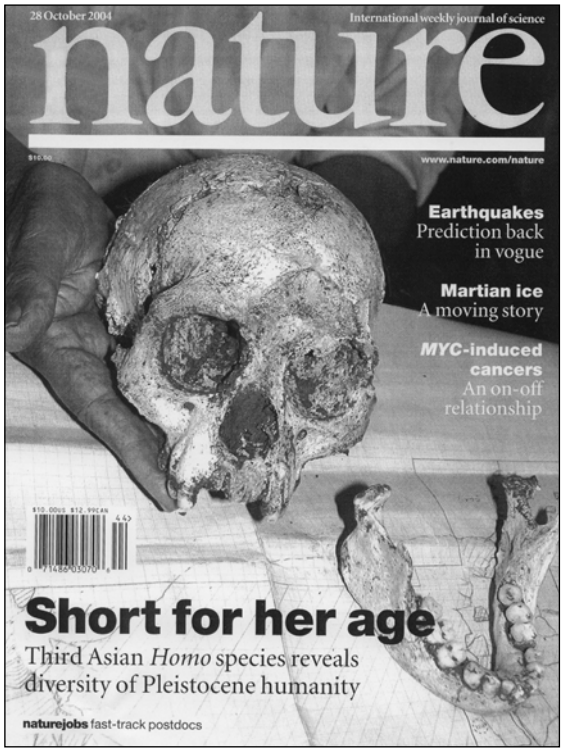
Almost as extraordinary as the discovery itself has been the media reaction, involving the immediate attention of major newspapers, news magazines and television networks – not to mention the flurry of commentaries appearing on the internet. But what, one may ask, does all

1. Details of the discovery were first published on 28 October 2004 in the journal *Nature*, in an article and three shorter pieces. See Mirazon Lahr and Foley 2004, Brown et al. 2004, Morwood et al. 2004, Dalton 2004.

2. With regard to finds of *Homo erectus* on Java, this position is argued at some length in a semi-popular book by Curtis et al. (2000).

3. In a newer classification, the term is 'hominin' – referring to a member of the 'hominini', which includes the genus *Homo* and several others but excludes extant apes. 'Hominid', however, is still the better known general term for the different species of *Homo*.

4. This second team member was another geologist, Gert van den Bergh, the same man who in June 2004 informed me of the discovery of *H. floresiensis*. At that time and in subsequent emails, we also discussed my interest in *ebu gogo*, and the possibility that the representation might be grounded in some zoological reality.



NATURE 28.10.2004

Fig. 2. The front cover of Nature *(28 October 2004), showing the skull of the type specimen of* H. floresiensis.

of this have to do with social or cultural anthropology? Actually, rather more than might at first appear. As if finding a new species of *Homo* that survived until at least 13,000 years ago were not enough, some members of the discovery team have gone so far as to suggest that *Homo floresiensis* may have lived until much more recent times, and may even still be living on Flores. Prominent in this context has been the name *ebu gogo*, a local term designating short, hairy and coarse-featured hominoids who – in one part of Flores – are locally believed to have survived until just 200 or so years ago. More particularly, it has been suggested that this folk category may reflect a memory of *Homo floresiensis*, maintained for hundreds if not thousands of years.

At this point, I must adopt the first person singular. I first encountered the term *ebu gogo* after starting ethnographic research in the Nage region of central Flores in 1984. People in the vicinity of Bo'a Wae (the main Nage village), and particularly people descended from inhabitants of the old village of 'Ua (Rua), told me how, several generations before, their ancestors had exterminated a group of these hairy creatures inhabiting a cave called Lia Ula, located not far above old 'Ua, on the northern slope of the volcano Ebu Lobo. Details of this tradition and descriptions of the physical appearance and behaviour of *ebu gogo* are recorded in my book, *Beneath the volcano* (Forth 1998). As I indicate there, a striking feature of the representation is its apparent historicity and matter-of-fact quality; in this regard it differs markedly from Nage representations of a variety of spiritual beings and mythical figures, and indeed Nage themselves deny that *ebu gogo* was anything like a spirit (ibid.). I therefore made the following observation:

> Without giving full credence to depictions of the wildmen as fully natural beings that are now extinct, one might yet consider that the idea of *ebu gogo*[…] may well have some empirical basis in a former component of the human population of Flores that is no longer present[…] (ibid.:105, fn. 9).

In the light of the discovery of *Homo floresiensis*, this statement might now be considered prophetic. Although not convinced that the Nage story was completely factual, so intrigued was I by their representation of *ebu gogo*, and especially details pertaining to the putative creatures' physical appearance, that I have continued investigating the category during subsequent visits to central Flores with the aim (also announced in Forth 1998) of producing a monographic study of the Nage image and comparable figures in other parts of Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Coincidentally, I first heard about the discovery of *Homo floresiensis* in June 2004, while I was in Holland conducting library research for this book project.

Following the post-modernist prescription, I have thus related *ebu gogo* to my own biography. Yet recently the Nage category has become far more famous than it ever could have through ethnographic attention alone. A few weeks before *Homo floresiensis* hit the headlines, an Australian geologist, Bert Roberts, is reported to have visited an unnamed village in central Flores together with another member of the palaeontological team (Gee 2004).[4] There they heard 'amazing tales' about *ebu gogo*, which evidently included morphological and behavioural descriptions. On this basis, Roberts 'thinks it is possible' that *ebu gogo* – here barely distinguished from *Homo floresiensis* – could still be alive. According to what villagers told him, the creatures stood about a metre tall, were 'long haired' and pot-bellied, had 'longish' arms and fingers, walked 'with a slightly awkward gait', spoke in murmurs, and engaged in mimicry. They could also climb trees, and were not known to use stone tools. The last time the central Florinese villagers had seen the creatures is specified as 'just before Dutch colonists settled that part of Flores in the 19th century'.[5]

Considering the apparent brevity of the geologist's enquiries, it is not surprising that some of this information appears inaccurate. For example, the longish arms and awkward gait, and even the height, do not agree with most Nage descriptions of *ebu gogo* I have recorded over the past two decades. It should also be remarked that anyone reading Roberts' observations might think that tales of *ebu gogo* circulated in the region of Liang Bua, in western Flores, where the skeletal evidence for *Homo floresiensis*

5. Actually, the Dutch did not 'settle' Flores – and in the part of central Flores evidently referred to, they established a colonial administration only in the early 20th century. According to genealogical and other evidence provided by Nage, I estimate that their extermination of *ebu gogo* would have occurred sometime between 1750 and 1820.

6. These comprise hairy man-like creatures sometimes identified as ancestors in Manggarai clan traditions, including those named Maja, Empo-Wulu, Paju La'e (Verheijen 1967), and Reba Ruek (Fointuna 2004). Writing on central Manggarai, van Bekkum (1946) refers to hairy aboriginals named Rua (apparently meaning 'wild'). Apart from other references, the Manggarai category *poti wolo* denotes what Verheijen describes as an 'ape-man' (1950) or a 'creature resembling an orangutan' (1967). (There are no zoologically attested orangutans or other apes on Flores.)

7. In fact, another inconsistency would appear to be the pot belly, since this is symptomatic of plant-eating, whereas the archaeological interpretation suggests *Homo floresiensis* was substantially engaged in hunting. Also, while Roberts says *ebu gogo* were 'about a metre tall', most Nage describe the creatures as between one and 1.25 metres, and some claim their height did not differ significantly from that of modern Florinese (who are, however, considerably shorter than most Europeans).

8. 'Spirit' or 'spiritual being' can be defined as a polythetic class, the most common criteria of which include a fundamentally human psyche, an ability to assume human or animal form, the ability to change shape, and the power to become invisible or separate from any corporeal form or limitation.

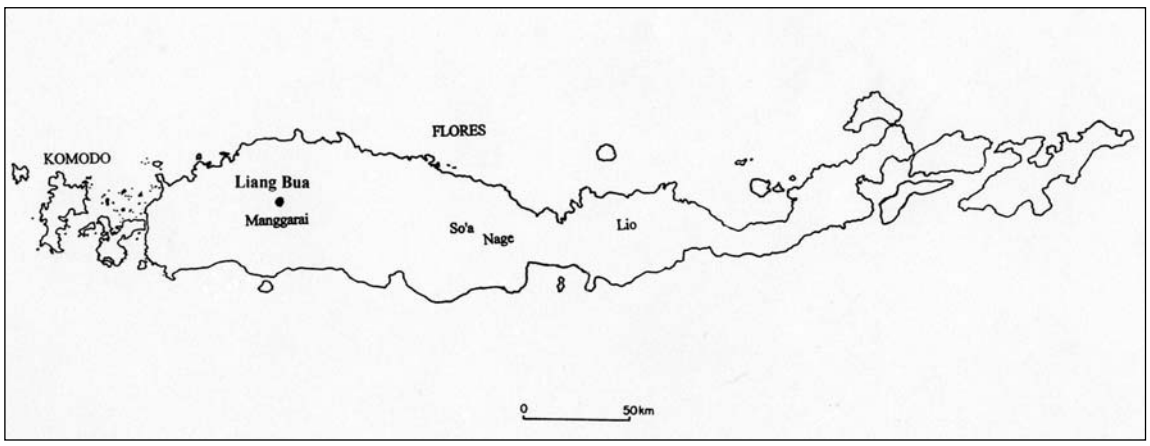


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Fig. 3. A map of Flores showing the location of Liang Bua and other regions discussed.

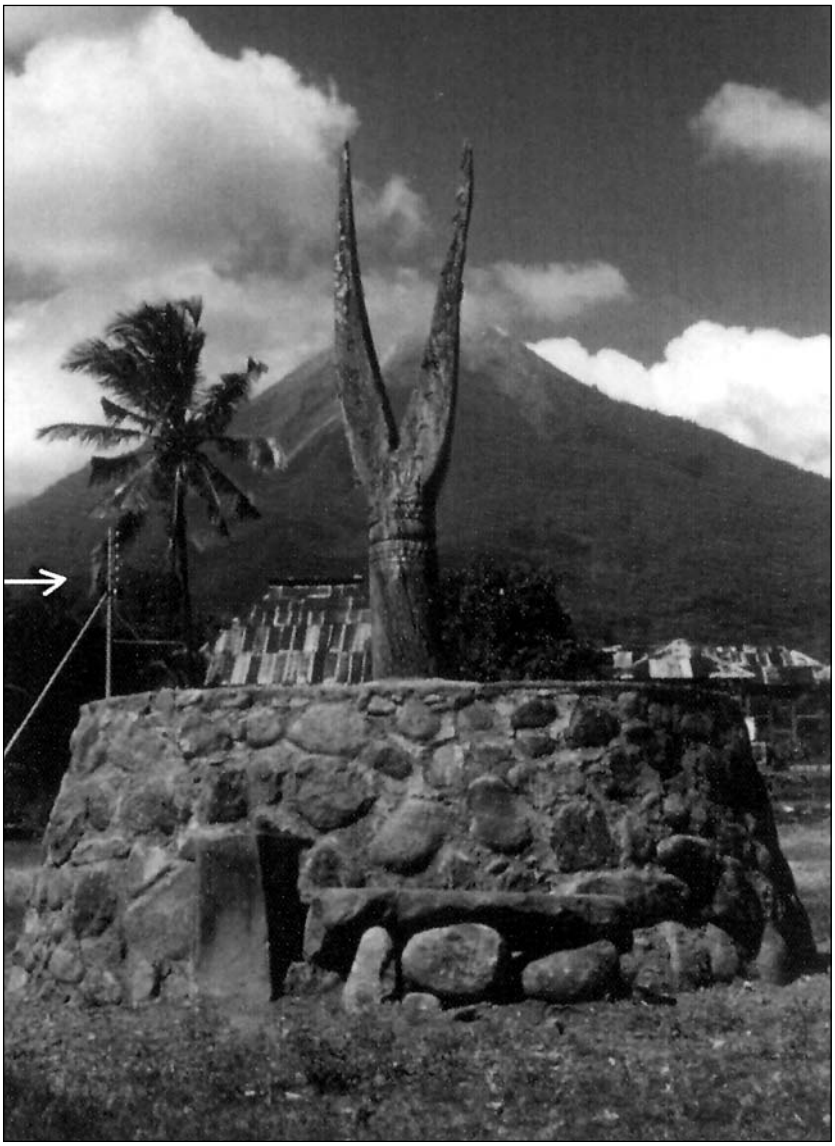

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Fig. 4. The chief Nage village of Boa Wae and the volcano Ebu Lobo. The approximate location of Lia Ula, the cave reputedly occupied by ebu gogo, *is indicated by the arrow.*

was discovered. The fact is that the category *ebu gogo* and traditions concerning this creature belong to the Nage, a culturally and linguistically distinct population residing well over 100 kilometres to the east (which is a long distance on a mountainous, economically undeveloped island like Flores). There are indeed representations of creatures similar to *ebu gogo* from western Flores – that is, the ethno-linguistic and administrative region called Manggarai – but, oddly enough, these have not been cited by members of the palaeontological team.[6] It is also curious that none of the scientific commentators wishing to link *ebu gogo* with *Homo floresiensis* has mentioned the main thrust of the Nage legend, and the feature that as much as anything lends it an air of authenticity. This is the claim that ancestors of the Nage, or more specifically the people of 'Ua, exterminated the hairy hominoids several generations ago, after tiring of their stealing from Nage fields and their alleged abduction of children. Nage accomplished their extinction by trapping the *ebu gogo* inside a cave and setting fire to a quantity of palm fibre they had given them to use as clothing (Forth 1998). If anyone is interested in local indications of how *Homo floresiensis* – to the extent that the species might be identified with *ebu gogo* – may have got along with local *Homo sapiens*, then surely this is it.

Referring to what he was told by Florinese villagers, Roberts is quoted as stating that the 'only inconsistency with the archaeological evidence [concerning *Homo floresiensis*]' is the idea that *ebu gogo* did not use stone tools (Gee 2004). Be that as it may, the most prominent feature of numerous Nage accounts I have recorded is the notion that female *ebu gogo* possessed pendulous breasts, so long that they could throw them over their shoulders.[7] The dimensions of female breasts is, unfortunately, one of many things that cannot be gauged from palaeontological evidence. (Another is whether a specimen was covered in hair.) At the same time, the breasts are among several features that the Nage representation shares with legendary creatures the world over, including the wildman of European mediaeval art and literature (Bernheimer 1952) and such hominoidal crypto-species as the Himalayan 'yeti', the 'sasquatch' or 'bigfoot' of northwestern North America (Napier 1972), and the wildman of China (Zhou 1982).

Spirits, hominoids and hobbits

However much *ebu gogo* might recall *Homo floresiensis* (or vice versa), it is therefore clear that the first figure equally resembles characters that are generally considered to belong to myth and fantasy. (Another fantastic attribute of *ebu gogo* is their reputed proclivity to swallow things whole, including rice mortars, puppy dogs and piglets.) But if some scientific commentators have perhaps been too quick to link the skeletal remains at Liang Bua with the Nage stories, social anthropologists have always been too much inclined to dismiss folk categories like *ebu gogo* simply as products of the imagination, or as 'spiritual beings'. Indeed, I myself may be so accused, insofar as my earlier treatment of *ebu gogo* is included in a book on 'spirit classification' (Forth 1998). This inclination to regard the seemingly fantastic images of non-Westerners as 'spiritual' largely reflects the Durkheimian legacy, whereby spiritual things are to be explained as symbolic refractions of social categories and relationships rather than as entities grounded in empirical realities external to society. Certainly there are problems in interpreting *ebu gogo* as directly reflecting local memories of *Homo floresiensis*. Yet whatever the derivation of the Nage representation, *ebu gogo* really do seem different from the various categories of spirits that Nage describe with equal credulity – and to that extent, I believe the possibility advertised by Roberts should be taken seriously. As noted, Nage themselves distinguish *ebu gogo* from 'spirits' (a general category contextually designated as *nitu*), and they do so explicitly with reference to the hairy creature's lack of extraordinary powers – for example, the ability to disappear, change shape, transform into animals and so on.

To ignore this local distinction, and simply assume that *ebu gogo* are only spirits after all, would be to follow a long-standing anthropological practice that is consistent with another, equally controvertible view, namely, that members of small-scale, non-Western societies are incapable of distinguishing empirical categories, the objects of ordinary intuition, from fantastic images dictated by religious tradition. Yet it may not be members of small-scale societies so much as anthropologists who have been guilty of this lack of discrimination. 'Spiritual beings' are, indeed, often grounded in empirical things, including experience of natural species. But this does not mean that people recognizing zoologically derived spirits cannot distinguish between ordinary animals and their spiritual transformations.

In a sense, then, recent musings about *ebu gogo* as a latter-day representation of *Homo floresiensis* refocus anthropological attention on an enduring analytical category. Although 'spiritual being' has often been employed uncritically (including as a catch-all for anything that does not accord with the current state of Western scientific knowledge), I do not argue that the category lacks validity. On the contrary, I think it is more useful than has sometimes been supposed, designating a class that is an identi-

9. An example of this sort of treatment is the *Daily Mail* article I refer to below, the author of which also describes modern Florinese, quite inaccurately, as themselves barely emerged from caves. Both Richard Dawkins and Henry Gee have criticized the application of 'hobbit' to *Homo floresiensis*, although in the end Gee judges it superior to other possible pseudonyms – including *ebu gogo*! I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising the interesting question of whether this application of 'hobbit' by academic researchers might be considered a denigration of human subjects and therefore a breach of professional ethics.

10. The term possibly means something like 'false monkey'. According to the article, the name is *babo mamo*, but this in fact is a Lio expression referring collectively to 'ancestors'.

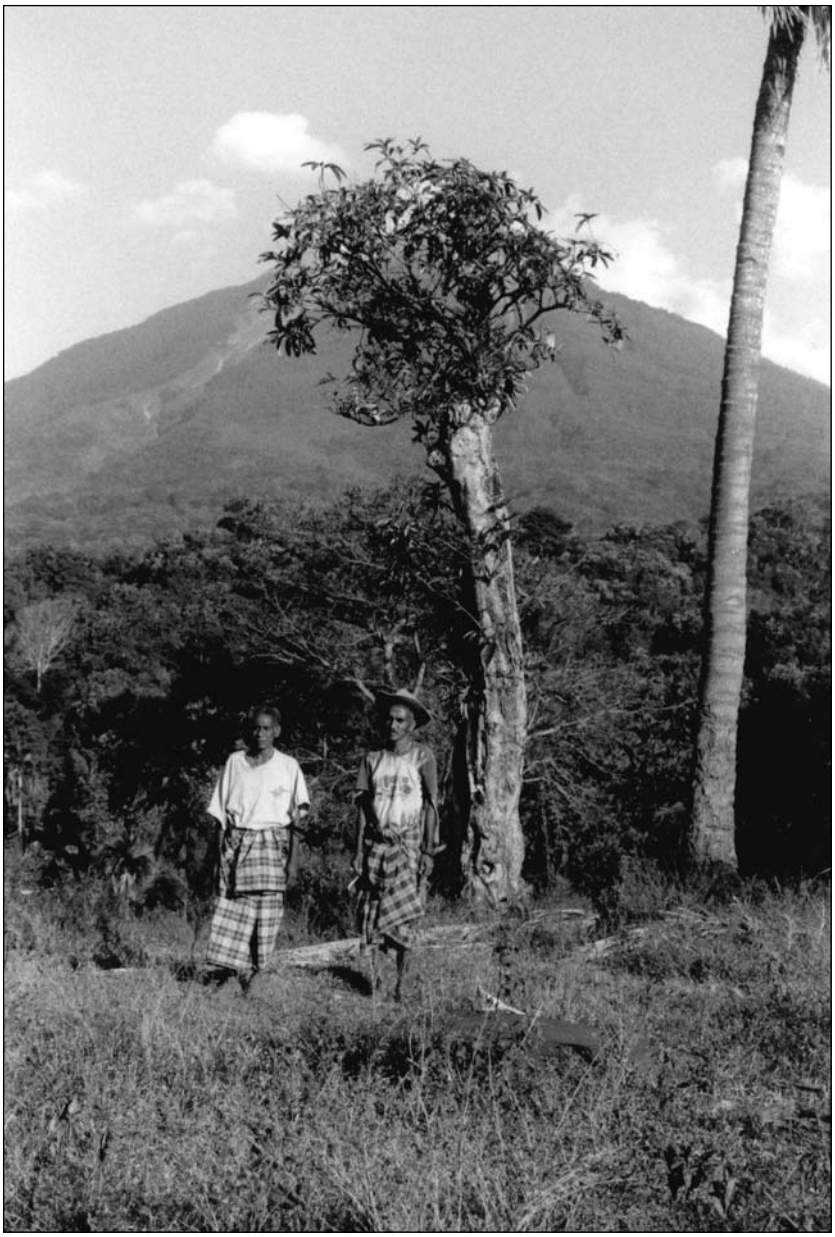

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Fig. 5. Nage villagers, with the volcano Ebu Lobo in the background.

fiable psychological property of societies worldwide.[8] At the same time, how folk categories like *ebu gogo* and scientific categories like *Homo floresiensis* might be connected is a complex question to which anthropologists have paid insufficient attention. Even if *ebu gogo* were empirical beings surviving until about 200 years ago as the Nage aver, this does not necessarily mean that these were descendants of the sub-fossil. They might, for example, have been a former, phenotypically distinct population of *Homo sapiens*, or a grossly exaggerated representation of a no longer identifiable indigenous group that preceded Nage in their present territories. And even if there were a connection with *Homo floresiensis*, the apparently fantastic features (e.g. the pendulous breasts) would still make the local representation something different from the actual hominid. On the other hand, if it could be shown that categories like *ebu gogo* substantially reflect creatures that became extinct very much longer ago, then this would obviously have implications for the notion of cultural or 'folk' memory, in relation to the study of legend and myth in general.

Ever since van Gennep (1910) estimated that oral reports survive as accurate accounts of past events for just 150 to 200 years, or at most two to three centuries, anthropologists and folklorists have maintained widely different opinions regarding the validity of oral traditions as factual historical records (Vansina 1965). This lack of consensus is hardly surprising, as the speed with which accounts of events are transformed in oral transmission has long been known to vary according to a number of factors, including subject matter, the identity of narrators, and the extent to which reports are incorporated into established narrative genres. Nevertheless, if the extinction of *ebu gogo* is grounded in actual occurrences, and especially if Nage are right that these took place just a few hundred years ago, then one may reasonably expect at least some features of the central characters – the hairy hominoids themselves – to have been faithfully preserved. Clearly, in establishing a link between *ebu gogo* and *Homo floresiensis* much depends on the discovery of material evidence for the survival of the new species significantly more recently than 13,000 years ago.

If anthropologists have been guilty of uncritically 'spiritualizing' categories like *ebu gogo*, it is equally remarkable how recent commentators have done something essentially similar with the newly discovered species. In particular, it has been found appropriate – evidently in order to communicate effectively with a wider public – to portray *Homo floresiensis* as a 'hobbit' (a choice obviously influenced by the recent Hollywood film versions of Tolkien's novels). Curiouser still, the designation was not a creation of the popular press, but of the scientific discoverers themselves. Bound up with this identification, which has inevitably resulted in a trivialization of the anthropological discovery, has been a transformation of Flores into an approximation of Conan Doyle's 'lost world', once the abode of pygmy elephants and still the home of giant lizards and giant rats (references respectively to *Varanus komodoensis*, or the 'Komodo dragon', and the endemic Flores giant rat, *Papagomys armandvillei*), and perhaps even of dwarf hominids.[9] But worse than this, casting *Homo floresiensis* as 'hobbits' potentially obscures the essential difference between an empirical species, designated a member of the genus *Homo* like ourselves, and the images of literary fiction. Like hobbits, both *Homo floresiensis* and *ebu gogo* are products of human imagination, but the images have different bases: tangible, skeletal and archaeological evidence in one case, and the testimony and traditions of local people in the other. Rather than simply assuming that these traditions are as fantastical as Tolkien's fiction, the challenge for social anthropologists is to discover the correct relationship between the palaeontological and ethnographic images and the true source of their resemblance.

Journalism, tourism and (maybe still) ethnography

Quite a different sort of relevance for social anthropology concerns the impact of the discovery of *H. floresiensis* on modern inhabitants of Flores, and on prospects for further ethnographic research into local representations of hairy hominoids like *ebu gogo*. The ink was barely dry on the *Nature* articles (see note 1) before a London tabloid, the *Daily Mail*, had a reporter on Flores island. Published on 6 November 2004, his story described encounters local people – apparently all from the Lio district of east central Flores, though the reporter's geography is rather imprecise – claimed to have had in recent years with real live 'hobbits' (Shears 2004). Without a doubt, the most startling story concerned a local man who had reputedly obtained the corpse of a small hairy hominoid that had just been buried by others of its kind. Wrapping it in cloth, the man had kept the corpse for years until all he had left was the skull, and – as is all too common with stories of this sort – this too was eventually lost.

Although not mentioned in the newspaper piece, the Lio term for the creatures is *lae ho'a*.[10] As I was able to learn from information I obtained in August 2003 – in fact, from

Anon. 1932. Levend of dood, een orang pendek. *De Gids* 96(2):257-58.

Balter, M. 2005. Small but smart? Flores hominid shows signs of advanced brain. *Science* 307:1386-89.

Bernheimer, R. 1952. *Wild men in the middle ages: A study in art, sentiment, and demonology*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Brown, P. et al. 2004. A new small-bodied hominin from the late Pleistocene of Flores, Indonesia. *Nature* 431(7012): 1055-1061.

Curtis, G., Swisher, C. and Lewin, R. 2000. *Java man: How geologists changed the history of human evolution*. New York: Scribner.

Dalton, R. 2004. Little lady of Flores forces rethink of human evolution. *Nature* 431(7012): 1029.
Dawkins, R. 2004. The giant leap for our sense of wonder. *The Sunday Times Review*, 31 October.
Falk, D. et al. 2005. The brain of LB1, *Homo floresiensis*. *Sciencexpress*. www.sciencexpress.org/03 Arch 2005.
Fointuna, Y. 2004. Dwarfs in Flores mythology. *Jakarta Post*, 30 November. http://www.thejakartapost.com/Archives/ArchivesDet2.asp?FileID=20041130.Q02
Forth, G. 1998. *Beneath the volcano: Religion, cosmology and spirit classification among the Nage of eastern Indonesia*. (VKI 177) Leiden: KITLV Press.
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Morris, D. 2004. Eton or the zoo? *BBC News*, 29 October, 09.55 GMT/10.55 BST.
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van Bekkum, W. 1946. Geschiedenis van Manggarai: II Todo en Pongkor. *Cultureel Indië* 8: 65-75.
van Gennep, A. 1910. *La formation des légendes*. Paris: E. Flammarion.
Vansina, J. 1965. *Oral tradition: A study in historical methodology*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
Verheijen, J.A.J. 1950. De stem der dieren in de Manggaraise folklore. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 106: 55-78.
— 1967. *Kamus Manggarai, I: Manggarai-Indonesia*. 's-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff.
Zhou Guoxing. 1982. The state of wildman research in China. *Cryptozoology* 1: 13-23.

some of the same individuals mentioned in the *Daily Mail* – these beings closely resemble the Nage *ebu gogo*. In certain respects, moreover, they seem more similar to *Homo floresiensis* than *ebu gogo*, being more consistently described as small and (according to what I was told) lacking the prominent breasts. But the main difference between the Lio and Nage creatures, evidently, is that *lae ho'a* are not yet extinct – although some stories I recorded suggest that local *Homo sapiens* have been no kinder to them than were the Nage ancestors.

I relate this tale not so much to raise again the possibility of a living *Homo floresiensis* as to consider how local representations of hairy hominoids may be affected by media interest in the 'hobbit'. Among other things, the *Daily Mail*'s man showed villagers an illustration of the reconstructed hominid that has appeared in numerous publications (see Fig. 1) And of course, what they claimed to have witnessed (or, in one case, obtained) looked exactly like this! One therefore wonders what chance there may now be of distinguishing indigenous representations from palaeoanthropological interpretations, especially in the Manggarai region where popular interest in *Homo floresiensis* is naturally most intense. I certainly feel fortunate to have compiled information on *ebu gogo*, over a period of some two decades, before modern Florinese became familiar with *Homo floresiensis*. In December, another newspaper story, this time in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (6 December 2004), quoted a Nage elder resident in Bo'a Wae – a man I have known since 1983 – to the effect that people of his village had, just three weeks previously, captured a female *ebu gogo* with 'long, pendulous breasts'. This contradicts everything I have ever heard concerning the extinction of *ebu gogo* a couple of centuries ago. It is quite possible that something was lost (or gained) when my Nage friend's statement was translated for the Australian reporter into English. But it is equally possible that a desire to find a 'real live hobbit' is transforming local traditions in all too predictable ways.

One also wonders about the general impact on Flores people residing in the vicinity of the cave at Liang Bua. Not long after the discovery was announced, tour operators began offering packages on the internet, advertising five-day expeditions to the site from Bali. In this there is obviously much to attract anthropologists interested in tourism, but how far Flores' new-found fame will actually benefit the Florinese themselves remains to be seen. If the experience of Komodo National Park is anything to go by, local people are unlikely to gain much in the way of employment opportunities from tourist interest in the haunts of the new found hominid, even as the creature becomes a regional tourist icon to rival the 'dragons' of Komodo (an island located just off Flores' western tip). On the other hand, also judging by Komodo 'dragon tourism' (Hitchcock 1993), one may hopefully anticipate an improvement in local communications and an expansion of currently scarce facilities for visitors – in this case in Ruteng, the Manggarai capital located some 15 kilometres south of Liang Bua. If it hasn't happened already, one can also foresee the imminent opening of a 'Hotel Hobbit'. Just as *ebu gogo* was ultimately a victim of Nage expansion, *Homo floresiensis* is rapidly becoming a commodity of modern capitalism.

What if *Homo floresiensis* really did still exist?

The question of the continuing existence of 'Flores Man' signals a rather more profound anthropological relevance for the discovery. Although not particularly probable, the survival of *Homo floresiensis* in remoter parts of Flores is not impossible. Having been evolving on the island, possibly for 800,000 years, and having registered its presence a mere 13,000 years ago, there is no reason in principle why the species could not have hung on for what in geological terms is just a little while longer – even in spite of the almost certain contemporaneous presence, for at least part of this period, of the little hominid's more sapient cousin.

I won't rehearse the obvious moral and humanitarian issues that would be raised by the discovery of living members of another species of the human genus. These have already been broached by several commentators, including Desmond Morris and Richard Dawkins. Dawkins has suggested someone should start looking for the creature right away. But would it be similarly reasonable, one wonders, to offer a bounty for the capture of a living *Homo floresiensis* or, failing that, a corpse (carcase?), as was done in the early 20th century in regard to the 'short man' (*orang pendek*) of Sumatra (see Anon. 1932) – a reputed hairy hominoid roughly the same size as *Homo floresiensis*, which has recently been interpreted as a possible undiscovered primate? Apart from such moral questions, anthropologists would also face a major professional challenge. For all the significance we attach to cultural difference among *Homo sapiens*, so far social anthropologists have had only one biological kind of human to study. An extant population of *Homo floresiensis* would change that immediately. We might then, for the first time, have the opportunity of studying a group that was truly 'other' – dare one also say, truly 'primitive'? By the same token, we should also have a splendid opportunity of discovering far more about what biology contributes to the social and cultural life of *Homo sapiens*.

But one is immediately led to ask: how equipped would social or cultural anthropologists (as distinct from, say, primatologists or biological anthropologists) be to respond to this challenge? Some might not be particularly interested – tending perhaps to an extreme constructionist view not just of cultures but of species, and then denying that there is very much new here at all. Largely because I don't really know the answer (nor, if it proved to be negative, why exactly it should be so), I would leave the question open. There is, however, a less hypothetical and more immediate question, namely, whether other anthropological disciplines (such as palaeoanthropology) – and for that matter the media – recognize a relevance for social or cultural anthropology in all this? Indications so far are that they probably do not. Before my own comment appeared in ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY (Forth 2005), over three months after the announcement of the discovery of *Homo floresiensis*, I encountered no published remark by any professional social anthropologist, and certainly none by anyone who had conducted ethnographic research in Flores. In the weeks immediately following the publication of the *Nature* articles, I was approached by several journalists, but only, it seems, because last summer I happened to meet a member of the palaeontological team and had mentioned my interest in the figure named *ebu gogo*.

But this is a continuing story, and much remains to be learned. Not all anthropologists accept the interpretation of a new species, not least because of the hypothesis of hominid dwarfing and development from *Homo erectus*. Even in spite of the endocast analysis, which has indicated greater intelligence than initially suggested by the diminutive brain, major questions have still to be resolved concerning attributions of language, collective hunting and the manufacture of tools (which are similar to ones hitherto attributed to local *Homo sapiens*). Although it seems unlikely, this could yet prove to be something of a false dawn. And in that case, social anthropologists might find an altogether different significance in the 'discovery' of a new kind of human on an eastern Indonesian island, and its hypothetical linking with local stories of hairy hominoids. ●